

# US cop a martyr in the drugs war: COLIN SMITH New York on how a ...

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# US cop a martyr in the drugs war

EDWARD BYRNE was the first New York policeman to be killed this year. It happened the day after President Eric Delvalle of Panama dismissed General Manuel Noriega following the General's indictment by two US federal grand juries for drug trafficking.

In the eyes of many Americans there is a remorseless link between these events. Byrne, who had celebrated his 22nd birthday five days before, was shot three times through the head as he sat in a parked patrol car in the mostly black suburb of South Jamaica during the freezing small hours.

He was there to guard the home of a witness involved in a relatively minor drugs case concerning the sale of crack, the lethal mixture of cocaine and baking soda that gives an instant high.

It is not uncommon for one of New York's Finest to die in the line of duty. Yet the turnout for last week's funeral of the man the tabloids call the rookie cop, for Byrne had only been in the force eight months, was unprecedented.

More than 10,000 American policemen, some from as far away as Texas and Ohio, stood in ranks 10 deep while the coffin was carried from the church and a lone Irish piper played 'When the Battle is Over'.

On the same day a full-page advertisement appeared in the *New York Times*. It cost almost \$13,000 and was paid for by the 1989 re-election committee of Edward Koch, the Mayor of New York, a Democrat who is much opposed to President Reagan and all his works. Under a large black-bordered photograph of the young policeman came a text urging New Yorkers

**COLIN SMITH** in New York on how a murder has sparked outrage against the 'drug thugs' of Latin America.

to send the President a telegram demanding that he cut off economic aid to Mexico, Panama, the Bahamas, Haiti, Paraguay or any other drug-source countries'.

This was only the beginning. At the funeral service the mayor stepped into the pulpit to compare the killing with the deaths of Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy and Dr Martin Luther King.

'If drug traffickers have become so emboldened that they engage in the assassination of a young policeman, then our whole society is at risk and we will have anarchy,' Mayor Koch warned. 'That is why his death rivals the others.'

## Banana republic

Some observers here noted that the mayor's demeanour was unusually subdued, for he is not a man noted for his finesse. Within 48 hours he was back in form, visiting Washington and telling something called the White House Conference for a Drug-Free America that Reagan was a wimp on the drug front and the country was sliding into a banana republic.

Meanwhile, Reagan had delivered some headmasterly could-do-better rebukes on their drugs record to Panama, Syria, Iran and Afghanistan, signed aid certificates for all the Latin American countries Koch named, and slipped off to Brussels to deal

with a more traditional warfront, his European allies.

It was left to a Ms Ann Wroblewski, assistant Secretary of State for Narcotic Matters, to explain that countries which were known to have poor records, Mexico for instance, had been given aid because of 'national interest'. This is shorthand for, 'we cannot afford to risk undermining a friendly regime and its replacement by Communist insurgents.' In the State Department it seems that Nicaragua still does more for the adrenalin than crack.

An exception has been General Noriega, whose famous complexion, caused by a particularly virulent case of teenage acne, which left him with the nickname 'pineapple face', stared out from last week's cover of *Time* under the bold headline, 'The Drug Thugs'. A former US ambassador to Panama, Ambler Moss Jr, has pointed out that like Somoza of Nicaragua, Marcos of the Philippines and Duvalier of Haiti, Noriega has a long record of being useful to various US government agencies.

The general permitted the US bases in Panama, required by treaty to have no other function but the protection of the canal, to be used for training the Contras. And according to Moss there are also indications that he channelled to the Contras some of the fortune he made by allowing Panama to be used as a springboard by Colombian smugglers.

But at the same time he is on record as being extremely helpful to the US Drug Enforcement Agency. This was confirmed by Robert Stutman, special agent in charge of the agency's operations in New York.

'Don't look surprised,' he told me as we gazed down on midtown Manhattan from his 19th



Salute of sadness: Policemen gather to honour fellow officer Edward Byrne

floor office. 'I never got a good tip yet from a priest or a rabbi.'

In the world, according to Mayor Koch, there is only one answer to the drug problem. You go to the source of the supply and you bash it. It is a point of view held by many Americans who feel that Nancy Reagan's plea for the nation's addicts to 'just say no' will hardly go down as one of the great battle cries of the Republic.

Mayor Koch's preference is more on the lines of 'they shall not pass'. Apart from economic strictures he has advocated a stronger paramilitary presence along the borders, which might make some sense against fast boats and wave-hopping Cessnas, but would certainly be con-

founded by the airline smuggler's swallowed condom.

Nor can the military take on the insidious power of what has today become known as the narcodollar — a currency bloc that is fast becoming to the 1980s what the petrodollar was to the seventies.

Within days of Officer Byrne being killed, one policewoman here was jailed on corruption charges and another was arrested after it was discovered she was living with a notorious drugs dealer. But whether this was for love or money is not yet clear.

A book has just come out recounting how two policemen from the 77th precinct sold the drugs they confiscated back on to the market. It is called 'Buddy Boys'.

At the DEA's Manhattan office last week, agents earning an average of \$45,000 a year were busy packing \$8 million in used notes into cardboard boxes destined for the Federal Reserve Bank. A lot of it was in small denomination notes: tens, fives, even singles. It represented 10 days of street trading in crack and was seized from a Colombian gang who came quietly enough, despite the two sub-machine guns they had with them. 'Listen,' said Stutman, 'they pay the 12-year-old kids they use as lookouts as much as \$150 a day.'

The appetite for drugs in the U.S., particularly cocaine which in its powder form is still considered chic and non-addictive by the upwardly mobile, appears

insatiable. Mayor Koch's argument is an emotive one and appealing.

But cooler heads point out that the cure, like the energy crisis, lies not in getting at the suppliers by squeezing poor Third World governments whose authority is already undermined by the enormous wealth of the drugs cartels. It is by reducing the demand.

Black leaders are trying to put the message across that drugs are a bar to progress in their community. 'Let's put it among the niggers because they don't have any souls — least that's what it said in "The Godfather"', said the Reverend Herbert Daughtry, a civil rights worker. 'Ain't no dope addict goin' to be worrying about elections.'

He was speaking at a meeting called by some black Muslims who were co-operating with police by seeing that crack houses, often derelict buildings with a working stove the mix can be baked on, remained closed once they had been raided.

The Muslims had just finished a 40-day experiment during which they had completely cleaned up a couple of blocks by organising their own patrols. I saw them in action, large men equipped with walkie-talkie radios and stern looks. Nonetheless, the Muslims' success was somebody else's misfortune, for the dealers had simply gone elsewhere.

By the end of the week two young black men were being questioned about the death of officer Byrne. One was said to be a known hitman in the turf wars between Lorenzo 'Fat Cat' Nicholls and Howard 'Pappy' Mason for control of the south-east Queens crack trade, thought to be worth about a \$100 million a year.

Both Nicholls and Mason are in jail, but apparently this does not stop business operating as usual.

In South Jamaica the young men had started to come back on to the street. A woman wearing surgical gloves who turned out to be a hospital worker was clearing up some litter in front of her house, which is about 400 yards from the spot where Edward Byrne died.

Among the litter was an empty crack tube. A chubby youth sauntered past carrying a ghetto blaster as big as an anti-tank rocket. He grinned at her. 'He's giving me a signal,' she said. 'What sort of signal? But she wouldn't say.'